

FGD: 11/07/2023, 06:00-08:00PM - Amsterdam, Meaza cafe, recorded

Four Participants:

P1: MG, Female, 49, From Asmara, Amsterdam, 27 years in the NL, High school

P2: SL, Female, 33, From Asmara, Amsterdam, 6 years in the NL, BA degree

P3: AA, Male, mid 40s, From Asmara, Zwolle, 23 years in the NL, Primary educated

P4: MK, Male, 24, From Gashbarka, Amsterdam, 3 years in the NL, Primary educated

IR: Thank you again everyone for agreeing to participate in this research. As I told you earlier, we will be discussing the role of digital skills in the integration of Eritrean refugees in the Netherlands. I think we are good start?

Let's start by discussing the types of digital devices you are familiar with and how often you use them. SL, can we start from you?

SL: Telephone, Laptop and tablet. I use my phone everyday and every time, I use my Tablet also every day. My laptop once in a while.

AA: I have a Samsung phone not an iPhone, I don't like an iPhone 9(laughing). I use my phone everyday. I don't use computer nowadays.

MG: I have a Sumsung smartphone too, I use it every day. I also have a Tablet but it is locked in my drawer, never used it (laughter).

MK: I only have my phone, this one. I use it the whole day.

IR: Which features, software, or applications do you use your mobile phone/laptop/tablet for? For example, Making direct phone calls, Using social media apps (WhatsApp, Telegram, Messenger, IMO), Using DigID, banking apps, service-related apps (insurance), Sending and receiving emails, video conferencing platforms, creating documents (word):

SL: I use my laptop for sending and checking emails, reading something, if I have something to order online and rarely for YouTube. I use my phone for daily contact, online banking, social media and DigID. I use apps like WhatsApp, IMO, hospital apps, music apps, online shopping apps. I use my tablet for email.

AA: I use my phone for contact, I also use my phone to get my work schedule, payments and the like. In the past everything was done manually and face to face. Now everything is in technology and it is a must to know how to use these digital technologies. I use my phone to contact my family and friends, I use it for banking services, and housing services. And literally I am dependent on this phone for everything.

MG: I use my phone for business contact, contacting with my family using Viber, IMO and WhatsApp. I can say that I use my phone for making and receiving calls.

MK: I use my phone similar to what the others said. Contacting with people, calling, social media and the like. I use Facebook, YouTube and TikTok. I don't have an email. I play games on my phone. I have digID but I use it with SMS verification as it is not easy for me to use. Similarly the banking is also difficult for me.

IR: What does integration mean for you? So far how was the integration process for you?

SL: For me personally, the most important factor in defining integration is being able to speak the language and culture of this country. It may not make that much difference in AMsterdam when it comes to language as everyone speaks English. But generally speaking a person has to know the language of the host if he is to integrate well. That makes a difference. I see it as the first step. Then knowing the norms and values. There are differences. For example I prefer not to talk explicitly here but there are things that you have to accept. For example homosexuality is not allowed in our culture but it is here. So, if we are talking about integration you have to accept and obey by the law and norms of the society. It is my responsibility to abide by the norms even if I disagree. As long as you are here there are things that you have to accept and live by even if you don't like them, That is particularly challenging for us.

AA: To add to what she said, even for me after staying for many years here accepting and getting used to some of the norms like the sex marriage has been difficult. I recall I had a Surinamese manager in my previous workplace. He was gay. I used to work as a broker for people to rent rooms and when this man asked me to find him a house I said yes. Then I found a room for rent from my Sudanese friend in my neighborhood. The next day I took the manager to the house but as we were walking I was very conscious and scared that people from my country would see and talk about me. So I would try to stay behind and pretend I am on the phone or something.

MG: When I first came here, my case worker was a lesbian. I didn't know until some days have passed and when I did I was somehow not comfortable. Even though she was a very good woman and helped me a lot in my times of hardship, I became scared of approaching her and talking with her. That is one example of the cultural differences and the difficulties we face as Habeshas. But gradually you get used to it and accept the norms and values. So for me integration means learning and accepting the rules and cultural differences.

MK: Integration as I understand it is understanding the culture of this country. Language is also important. Finding employment and becoming independent is also another issue. For me I am still new, it's been only three years. Not knowing the languages (English and Dutch) is challenging for me. So I had to work harder to learn the language, especially in my first year.

IR: How do you use digital technologies in your everyday life and activities? Have digital skills played a role in your integration process? If so, can you elaborate on how? Do you feel that digital technologies have helped or hindered your integration into Dutch society? Can you provide specific examples?

SL: As I mentioned earlier, I use different technologies in my everyday life. As you all can see, this country is advanced in technology. And they have everything on the internet, computer or mobile phone. For me, I think being able to use the internet and other technologies has made it easy to navigate the system in this country. You go to a certain office and they would tell you to do it online or to use their app. I can do that. But for many people from our country, many of my friends that is not easy. And they would come and ask for help. Generally

speaking, I believe digitalization is making it difficult for people in our community from integrating well into the Dutch system.

AA: Well, it has been more than 20 years since I come here. And when I first come here technology was not an issue. It is recently that everything has changed and the pace of change was very fast. I think I consider myself for not being able to catch up with the fast technological change. Before I knew it everything was changed.

MG: I should say I live in my own little world here. I know everything is different, with the technology and everything. I use my phone for basic things. But I am not good with the technology. So if we are talking about being able to use digital devices very well, then I don't belong there. Because literally, I am detached from the internet. I don't even use an email. Mind you, I have an email, but I don't want to use it. Because it becomes complicated when they make everything online or digital. What helped me is that I speak the language here. So I call every office and try to get my issues resolved over the phone.

MK: I am a huge user of TikTok and Facebook. I am on my phone all the time when I am not asleep or working. Before I come here, you hear about the internet, and the first thing that comes to your mind or what we know was Facebook. I thought the internet was the same as Facebook. But after coming here, I feel like the internet is another world by itself. So, I struggle a lot to do things online or on applications. So I think it is somehow difficult for me. But again, I think it will be better with time. Because I still feel I am new to this country.

IR: Now I will ask you specific questions. How do you currently use digital technologies to access information about your rights and obligations as a refugee in the Netherlands?

SL: Actually before I came to the Netherlands I took part in a citizenship education in their embassy in Addis Ababa. They gave us a very detailed orientation about the rules and regulations, culture, what you call the norms and values and everything. So, I knew before hand what to do and what not to do before coming here. After I come here I visit the IND website if I have issues of concern about benefits or about citizenship application and so on.

AA: If it is about the do's and dont's, I learned while I was in the camp. Nothing more.

MG: As asylum seeker you get orientation about what to do and not to do. Afterwards it is mostly your case worker who guides you about your next steps, your rights, and different applications at different stage, until you get your Dutch passport. I don't mean you won't have a case worker after that, but mostly they help you in your first few years. For me there is nothing I can say about how the digital skills helped me in this area.

MK: Similar to what they have said, we learned about our rights and duties while at the camp. And then my case worker have been sharing with me about these formally and informally.

IR: Have you used any digital tools or resources to learn Dutch or other languages? How effective have these been?

SL: Oh yeah, it helped me very much. At the time of my language course, I was working in a cafeteria. I was very occupied and busy. So, what helped me greatly to learn the language was YouTube videos and the duolingo app. Every night before I go to sleep I would open a comedy or drama in Dutch and then just watch even though I don't understand a thing. At first I was using English subtitles but then I stopped that. YouTube tutorial videos also helped me. I also used the duolingo app, which was actually very helpful to improve my vocabulary. They helped me a lot.

AA: We are old (pointing to MG and laughing). There were no smart phones or YouTube to help us learn language on the internet in our time. We used to watch Dutch dramas on TV if that is to be counted. But apart from that I haven't used any technology.

MG: You are right AA. There was no YouTube, and the internet as it is today. That was actually good in a way. Because we learned the language anyways. (laughter)

MK: I watch YouTube videos and TikTok videos. But I am not sure if they were helpful or not (laughing). Because I am watching different videos and I don't know if they are actually helping me or not. That is the single most important thing my smart phone has helped me, the videos.

IR: Have you encountered any challenges using digital technologies in the Netherlands, such as language barriers or lack of access to technology? How have you overcome these challenges, if at all?

SL: Oh, absolutely! When I first came to the Netherlands, I have to admit, the whole digitalized setup was quite scary for me. Everything seemed to be connected to technology, and I felt a bit overwhelmed. Luckily, for me being able to access things in English did help me navigate through most of it, in terms of language.

But what really got me worried was the issue of privacy. I didn't end up in an asylum camp since I came here through a family reunion, but some of my friends and relatives weren't so fortunate. It's crazy how they had to go through a weird process, where asylum authorities checked inside their phone, their online presence, their social media activities. That whole thing just felt scared and annoyed, and it really got me thinking about privacy and human rights, especially since it is in Europe where these issues are discussed and seem to be valued.

MK: [INTERRUPTED] yeah yeah that is right, I throw my phone when I applied for asylum too.

SL: Yeah, but again you can use Google translate if you understand English, but many resources and websites are in Dutch. That can be challenging for some people.

AA: Back when I first arrived here over twenty years ago, digital technology weren't as extensive as they are now. But as time went on, everything started interconnecting, and keeping up with it all became a real challenge for me.

So for me besides to the language as SL mentioned, one of the main challenge was adapting to the continuous changes in digital technology. It seemed like every day, there was a new application or software, and I couldn't keep up with all of them. Then I gave up to try to learn and install every new app and skill needed for it.

My God, I used to be a host of a PalTalk (Laughter). That was very cool and in my time I was like a tech-savvy (laughter). So, while my daughters for example seemed to embrace the latest tech without effort, I found myself struggling to learn and adapt to the new digital tools.

Moreover, as digital devices and services became more integral to daily life, there were times when I felt left out because I didn't have access to certain technologies. While smartphones and tablets have become ubiquitous, I clung to my trusty old flip phone for a long time. Eventually, I did make the switch, but it wasn't an easy decision for me.

So, how did I overcome these challenges? Well, I sought help from my daughters and my friends who are more tech-skilled than I am.

Inspite of all the difficulties, including the language barrier. I gradually start to appreciate the benefits that digital technologies offer. From online banking and shopping to social media. But I won't lie (laughter) some times I long for the simple pre-digital era.

MG: I have certainly faced my share of challenges with digital technologies. To be honest, I never considered myself a technology person, and the rapid

advancements in digital devices and applications often left me feeling a bit overloaded.

One of the main challenges for me was not having easy access to technology. In the early years of my life here, I didn't own a personal computer. As more and more things transitioned to online, I felt a bit left out and disconnected from the digital world.

I ask for help from young people and neighbors. So even for the simplest things I have to ask for help. But that don't make you feel good. You won't have privacy as the person who is helping you will see and know everything or your bank or health information can be at risk.

MK: I've encountered some challenges with digital technologies since arriving here. The general assumption that everyone is good with smartphones and technology can be stressful. People see me as a young person and automatically assume I can handle anything with smartphones and technology, but the truth is, I wasn't as proficient as they thought, especially when I first came here.

When I applied for asylum in the Netherlands, I became even more cautious about using digital devices. The fear of the invasion of privacy was real, and I heard stories about asylum officers scanning phones and checking social media accounts. Everything that you were saying SL. It made me anxious, so I decided to hide my phone and delete my Facebook account at that time. The idea that these digital tools could potentially be used to track people felt very unsettling, (laughter).

Language has also been a significant problem for me in dealing with digital technologies. When I first arrived, I couldn't speak English or Dutch, and that posed additional challenges. The languages used on smartphones and

applications were primarily in English and Dutch, but unfortunately, not in my native language Tigrinya. Trying to look everything in a language I wasn't familiar with was quite challenging.

Also, to the best of my knowledge there are no digital skills trainings for refugees, are there? But I haven't seen any.

For me my friends are my greatest support whenever I need help doing something online, making an appointment or an application. But that also has its own down sides. It made me very comfortable. For example whenever I want to do something, I just call my friend or go to him.

IR: In what ways do you think digital skills and access to technology could be improved for refugees in the Netherlands?

SL: I would say digital literacy trainings first and foremost. Many people arrive here with limited knowledge of using digital devices and online platforms, so offering such trainings would be immensely beneficial. It could have been provided in the first months when we were learning the language. One of the mandatory things you do as a refugee here is attending a language course. As refugees, I understand the importance of learning the Dutch language to integrate successfully. However, for me it feels they are making profit from this. They give you money for learning the language, which is a loan by the way. A loan that you have to pay afterwards. So as not to deviate from the topic, my point is digital literacy is as essential as language is. So it should be given in the first few months of arrival.

Additionally, making sure that refugees have access to digital devices is crucial. For a lot of refugees, owning a smartphone or a computer might not be easier,

especially considering the challenges we face in the migration journey and early life here.

AA: I agree with what SL said about providing training. I think that could be something the municipalities should consider. Digital skill is the language that we use to communicate with modern technologies, so as much as providing Dutch language courses, digital skills courses should also be made available.

MG: I would say the case workers could allot some of their time towards assisting us or perhaps showing us how to use certain technologies. A clear set of expectations and activities should be defined.

MK: Same, training is essential. Do I have to add more (laughing).

IR: Do you use any online platforms or apps to connect with other refugees or people from your home country? How has this affected your sense of community and belonging in the Netherlands?

SL: Definitely, I use WhatsApp and Telegram to connect with others people from my country. You all already know, we have WhatsApp groups as Eritreans, and we also have groups based on specific interests and religion for example. I am a member of Eritrean evangelicalists. So we actively share information, post house for rent or something for sale. These groups are especially important if you are new here. They are of a massive help, with the information, with the guidance even financial assistance for some families whose relative is held hostage by the

smugglers in Libya or Sudan. These connections were helpful to feel like you are at home here.

AA: Like SL said, I am also a member of the Eritreans in the Netherlands group, but also there is another group for people from my city in Eritrea. It is the same, like she said we share information, help find housing and jobs.

MG: I too am aslo a member of the WhatsApp group.

MK: Me too.

IR: Now I will ask you a question on: have you had the opportunity to interact with Dutch people or participate in Dutch social events? If yes, have you used any digital tools or platforms to connect with Dutch people or participate in Dutch social events?

SL: Yes, I would say. I have Dutch friends, and mainly my contacts through my work. At first it was one woman, her name is EE, who helped me a lot during my first few months in the Netherlands. She helped me learn the language, introduced me to her family and everything. Gradually, my network expanded and I have more friends right now. However, I haven't used any social media to make friends or participate in any events. But of course I use mainly WhatsApp to chat with my friends.

AA: To this date, I never had any Dutch friends. I prefer to be with people from my country, Ethiopia or Somalia.

MG: Personally, especially after I learned their language I have many Dutch friends and contacts. This was particularly inspired by a volunteer woman, who helped me during my first years in the Netherlands. She took me to different events, even in different cities and places.

MK: I don't have any interaction with Dutch people except for my case worker, but she is also a Moroccan.

IR: Have you been able to find employment since arriving in the Netherlands? If not, what are the challenges you face in finding a job?

SL: Now I have a job. I am working as a receptionist in a hotel. But I have a degree and a 1 year work experience from Ethiopia, which they don't accept in here. That was very annoying for me. I remember there was this person who told me that people buy degrees in other countries. So we don't allow you to work with just a degree from your country. I could do a test, I could do an interview but it doesn't matter, they don't accept it here. That was so unfair. But I took online courses and started from the scratch and now I am working as a receptionist. In the meantime, I am taking other courses related to my previous degree so that I find a job more related to my interests.

AA: The thing in the Netherlands is that sometimes you work and sometimes you don't. At the moment for example I am not working. But I can work from time to time, I just have to reach out to my friends who can give me a job for few days to get extra cash.

MG: I used to work, until I got into a bike accident about six years ago. Now as AA said I would work for few days for some cash in the black market and then rest. I get the social welfare from the government, but that is just to cover your basic needs. I prepare food at home and share it on the WhatsApp group. But I had to be careful as the authorities could fine me.

MK: I have a job, I work in a restaurant. The only requirement was speaking the language, so I managed to start working few months after I got here.

IR: Have you received any support or training to develop digital skills related to job search or job performance?

SL: Do you mean by the government or by myself?

IR: It could be by the government or other organizations working with refugees.

SL: No, not at all. I took online courses on LinkedIn and so on, but I haven't received any training on job searching and application.

AA: No, I didn't get any trainings either.

MG: No, no trainings.

MK: No!

IR: Have you faced any challenges in accessing basic services such as healthcare, education, or housing in the Netherlands?

SL: Well for me at first I was scared of my privacy. I was always conscious of my online activities for fear of the government tracking me. Also, they would send you email or information in Dutch, I can translate it in Google but Google translate is not reliable. For example my Bank was only available in Dutch back then, that made it very difficult for me to check my balance, send money or adjust settings for automatic monthly bills. Even it was hard when I want to cancel my subscription to certain services. And when you call them directly, sometimes the officer may not speak English or may not be good in English. That was pretty much difficult for you.

AA: Language has always been a challenge for me, even now. Also, the technologies are changing every day and I can't catch up with all the new software and services. So, now I gave up (laughing). And my daughter helps me with pretty much everything. Once, there was an app connected with my bank. I don't know if you know it, but it was something used for transport and it was connected to my bank and somehow it started taking money from my bank account. I wanted it to stop. I wanted to cancel it but I didn't know how to at the time. So it keeps taking money. I didn't even need that app at the time (laughing). I heard friends talking about it and I also wanted it.

SL: But you can cancel it, right?

MG: Yes, but that is the challenge.

AA: Another thing is about the housing. So for a long period of time, I didn't face a problem with housing, but once I had to use this application for housing. So, a list of housing would appear on the screen, many of them. I never had to use that before, so I had no idea what to expect and what to do literally. And then, I would see the list, I don't know what to do. I look at them and they look at me (laughing). Later I learned there is a point system that you will get points and that is how you rank. But luckily, I have my daughter and would ask her for help. As I said earlier I used to be good with technology, somehow. I was even an admin in a Pal Talk. Pal Talk was the social media of our time, it was addictive. At first, it was in text and then audio came and lastly we could chat on video seeing each other. I was the one who would help my friends with such issues. I was in England before I came here and my friends would joke that I went to Oxford (laughter). But gradually everything changed and it seemed impossible to catch up with the latest developments.

MG: I don't prefer to use those technologies, especially email. So, I have an email, even though I can't use it well. But still, if they ask me if I have an email I would always say I don't. So I would complete my issues there. I literally depend on friends and neighbors for everything that requires a digital tool. But there are things that I would want to do in private, but you have to share it with the person helping you. And sometimes, with everything going digital it makes me feel left out. Also, I don't know if I should say it as is but there used to be some officials who would look at us as inferiors. Just because you asked something you didn't understand. They would downgrade you. But I am not saying all of them. Most of

them are supportive and understanding. Another quite common challenge among Habesha people here is Belasting which is tax return.

AA: Yes, I forgot that.

MG: That is something that can be done online. And it is extremely difficult and complicated. So many people would end up in debt because they don't understand how the process works and we don't know about the regulations and how it works.

AA: Even the Dutch themselves don't about it (laughter).

MG: So, there are Moroccans and Turks who can help you do that and you have to pay them in return. But sometime later you would have to pay back all the money you get from a tax return.

AA: In relation to that, the whole process of Inburgering is a pure business. So for example the Duo debt that we have to pay them back. At first, you are new, and when you start learning the language and everything you don't know if it is a debt or not. I didn't know until some years later that they sent me an accumulated debt to pay back.

MG: But you ate that money.

AA: I didn't eat, I learned (laughter). But whatever, you don't have a choice, you have to complete the Inburgering. So, you have to pay whatever.

SL: I agree with what you say, that they are making business from all this.

AA: Yeah, what the Duo does is first they show you 7000 Euros, it is not in your possession, but they give you the impression that it is yours. And then what they do is, they would say there is a new book that you have to use and you won't even need or read the book, you don't even have a say on that. Then they would deduct it from the money. And then they would gradually make you pay that money back. That is pure business, but what makes it worst is that you are not aware of it. And out of nowhere, without my knowledge, they sent me a debt that I am paying until now.

SL: Oh I remembered something about the language and the Inburgering process. I paid for the language course and everything, I paid 300 Euros every month and then after I passed the Inburgering, the municipality sent me that I can attend free courses. That is a cruel joke. What is the use of a free course after I paid and completed the Inburgering? So that's why I say it is a business that they are doing.

MK: I think I already mentioned it earlier. Language and lack of ability to use technology are the challenges I face.

AA: You are quite?

MK: I am learning from your experiences.

MG: We are all sharing our experiences.

IR: Have you had any opportunities to attend digital skills training programs or workshops in the Netherlands? If so, can you describe your experience and how it has benefited you?

SL: No, I haven't received any training. I don't think there are digital skills trainings for refugees.

AA: No, none.

MG: No

MK: No

MG: (Talking about a prescription and started asking SL if she knows a certain prescription is good for her because she started having side effects)

IR: What kind of support or resources do you think would be beneficial in helping refugees like yourself in the Netherlands improve their digital skills and enhance their integration?

SL: As to me it would be helpful if there were access to online and offline courses depending on the individual situation and preferences that teach digital skills. Not only that but also providing certificates that are recognized in the Netherlands. And most importantly, in my case making it easier for diplomas and work experiences from outside Netherlands to be easily recognized and accepted here.

AA: I agree with you, digital trainings are essential, but they should be available for free. Because I don't want to have another debt (laughter).

MG: You are so traumatized by Duo (laughter).

AA: Absolutely

MG: Similar to what they said, training is important.

MK: I agree, but in addition to trainings devices like laptops and tablets should be provided with affordable prices, if not for free. Also, the platforms and websites they should really add Tigrinya as an optional language. We are a lot of Eritreans and that would be helpful.

SL: Yes exactly, that would also save them tons of money for interpreting and translation.

IR: Is there anything else you would like to add or share about your experience with digital skills and integration?

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